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Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship

V Geetha

Given the near-visionary resonance of Periyar's life work, it becomes somewhat difficult to separate his political and social legacy. But though his vision has been politicised, made to bear witness to a non-brahmin and, in some instances, a Tamil will to power, it, yet, resists a complete co-optation into politics. It intimates to the interlocutor of today an abiding ethic which is not at all explicable in terms of quotidian politics. It is this ethic which is the subject of this paper and an attempt is made to explore it for the lessons it may hold out for contemporary feminist debate and practice.

MY paper is not about independent India. It seemed to me that the progress or retardation of the women question in independent India cannot be grasped, unless one possesses a complex and nuanced understanding of the events that lead to the exit of the British from this subcontinent. Such an understanding cannot merely veer between the elite and subaltern versions of Indian nationalism, but would have to actively engage with the histories and ideologies of social and political movements whose founding premises were not, in fact, are not definable within the terms of Indian nationalism. I propose to examine aspects of such a history, a history that will enable us re-inscribe the context and content of independence as well as make for a different and more imaginative engagement with contemporary feminist concerns.

I look here at aspects of the Self-Respect Movement, a radical anti-caste movement, begun by E V Ramasamy Periyar in 1925, and which convulsed the Tamil country into eruptions of defiance, anger and subversion for the next two decades. Later, Periyar's movement suffered several mutations. The Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) was formed in 1944 by Periyar himself, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949, by a group of men who were dissatisfied with the DK. Both organisations continue to be vocal and active in Tamil politics today. However, it seems to me that in different ways, both have compromised and even reneged on the founding ideals of the Self-Respect Movement. This is so, particularly, with reference to the women's question, the resolution of which was quite central to the self-respecters' anti-caste agenda. While some formal victories have been secured meanwhile, such as the legalisation of self-respect marriages, which desacralised marriage and re-defined it as a contract for living together, and the securing of women's rights to property in law – both of which were made into law, when the DMK was in power previously – there have been no other substantial achievements. The DK continues to affirm the importance of securing women's rights and liberation as part of its "consciousness raising" politics, but its gestures in this matter have proved more formal than substantive, more a repetition of time-worn ideas rather than imaginative interventions in the debates and struggles currently being carried out by women's groups. There are individuals, in and out of the party, who continue to affiliate themselves with Periyar's ideas on gender and work around rights issues, but the DK as an organisation plods along in a well rehearsed path.

But then history works its effects in curious ways. For one, historical change does not always follow a linear path and, secondly, the past catches up with the present in very many unexpected ways; so much so that to reclaim an inheritance, one feels impelled to begin, not from the formal, official legacy which often serves the political and strategic interests of the particular ruling group in question, but from a chosen point of arrival, and then loop around the present to connect up with the past. For me, the point of arrival of an interesting and relevant legacy is the present, a present, dominated by interesting debates in women's groups – in Tamil Nadu – on the complex and fraught relationship between gender and caste on one hand, and a dalit political militancy on the other. It is from this present moment that I wish to interrogate a past which I think speaks to contemporary feminist concerns and anxieties, especially to those who are engaged in debating questions of identity and community and exploring the possibilities of justice for women in a social context, where neither law nor community, in themselves, seem to be able to guarantee women their fundamental rights.

E V Ramasamy Periyar died in 1973. He was 95. Two years before his death, he explained his life's work thus:

> Though I have endeavoured all along to abolish caste, as far as this country is concerned, this has meant I carry out propaganda for the abolition of god, religion, the shastras and brahmins. For caste will disappear only when these four disappear. Even if one of these were to remain, caste will not be abolished in its entirety...because caste has been constructed out of these four...only after man has become a slave and a fool would caste have thus been imposed on society.
>
> –Periyar, *Ninety-Third Birthday Souvenir*, January 17, 1971 [Anaimuthu 1974:1974].

Periyar viewed his life's mission as nothing less than millennial and constantly sought to locate the new citizen he wished to constitute in an anticipated utopia. The future was everything and the present and past were important, in as far as they could be subjected to careful scrutiny by a watchful, yet, ironic reason, which looked to sift, from these times, moments of rational, intelligent worth, moments which were to usher in the millennium.

Given the near-visionary resonance which Periyar brought to his life's work, it becomes somewhat difficult to separate his political and social legacy from his prophetic world view. This may seem a somewhat surprising observation, since there have been and there are several political movements and parties which claim Periyar for their own; which seek to place him at the origins of a distinctive politics of nation and caste, defined in and through the terms of what may be termed a non-brahmin exceptionalism. But though Periyar's vision has been thus politicised, made to bear witness to a non-brahmin and, in some instances, a Tamil will to power, it, yet, resists a complete co-optation into politics; remains stubborn in its autonomy, intimating to the interlocutor of today, the presence of an abiding ethic which is not at all explicable in terms of quotidian politics and its constitutive ideology, electoral democracy.

It is this ethic which is the subject of this paper: I hope to explore it for the lessons and the inspiration it may hold out for contemporary feminist debates and practice. It seems to me that this ethic, which, I believe, has survived politics, even at the risk of being marginalised by it, speaks to feminists today with an urgent appeal.

Placing Periyar

From his earliest days in public life, Periyar was wary and contemptuous of politics, the realm of power, contention, manipulation and machinations, of office, honours and authority. When he launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1925, he consciously chose to work in, what we today, refer to as civil society. Then, this was a restricted space, held captive to colonialist 'native' intelligentsia. This colonial subject, male, upper caste and

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middle class, on his way to becoming a nationalist, dominated civic life in the Tamil country, as elsewhere: a civic life, devoted to ideas, agitations, meetings, mobilisation of men and resources and which engaged the colonial state in a vigorous dialogue, confronting it with its professed commitment to progress and freedom. These articulate and earnest men fashioned for themselves a sober, solemn subjectivity, anticipating an ideal of citizenhood, which, in the years to come, would find its most lofty expression in the Constitution of free India. But in the 1920s and 1930s, this ideal was only in the making and was subject to the attractions of that curious admixture of politics and piety, which Gandhi embodied in his person and utilised to justify his practice. The colonialist (nationalist) subject's dream of a modern, free nation was riddled with fantasy and nostalgia, elements which were crucial to Gandhi's vision of free India, of a Hind Swaraj.

Periyar, iconoclastic, sensitive to caste as a system of inequality and cruelty, was initially a fellow traveller with these dreamers of modern India: he was much influenced by the Gandhi of the mid- and late-1920s, inspired by the ideals of non-cooperation and constructive work. However, he inflected the Gandhian ideal in his own terms. As he wrote in the very first issue of his remarkable weekly, *Kudi Arasu*:

> A sense of self-respect and fraternity must arise within human society. Notions of high and low amongst men should disappear. A sense of the unity of all humankind must dawn in each of us. Communal confrontations must cease to be. In the course of propagating these ideals, we will not hesitate to take on friend or foe if they range themselves against us and criticise us through word and deed [Anaimuthu 1974:xxiv].

Periyar's re-reading of Gandhi was particularly evident in his definition of untouchability. It is clear from his pronouncements of this period that he held the abolition of untouchability to be contingent on the attainment of self-respect by the 'adi dravidas'. Thus, he would imprecate, rage, cajole and persuade adi dravidas to fight an oppression which inhered as much in their felt lowliness, as it did in those social and economic structures which utilised their labour and cast them aside as untouchable (*Kudi Arasu*, May 24, 1925; June 21, 1925). Periyar also made it clear that the liberation of other non-brahmin castes lay in the liberation of the adi dravidas [Anaimutha 1974:404]. This anti-caste, egalitarian vision sustained Periyar's work and thought, even after he broke faith with Gandhi. This happened in 1927, after Gandhi had expressed at a public meeting in Mysore, his faith in the norms of 'varnadharma'. Periyar had been uneasily aware of Gandhi's peculiarly convoluted arguments about caste and untouchability and *Kudi Arasu* carried a courteous but firmly-voiced criticism of Gandhi's stance in this respect in late 1925. The critic, one Pandit Dharma Deva Siddhanta Alangarar, had remarked that by endorsing 'varna' differences, Gandhi was creating obstacles in the way of the one objective dear to his heart: the abolition of untouchability (*Kudi Arasu*, September 13, 1925).

After 1927, Periyar undertook a systematic, relentless campaign against the Mahatma's politics of piety on the one hand and on the other hand, chose to work in those very spaces Gandhi had recognised as pertinent, both for the transformation of Hindu (and by implication, Indian) subjectivity and the drawning of Hind Swaraj. These were spaces constituted by the interlinked realms of consciousness, communication, sexuality and identity. To re-work and reclaim these spaces for a radical utopia, Periyar founded the Self-Respect Movement in 1925 and worked hard to advance a counter to both the lures of the Gandhian Congress as an institution and nationalism as an ideology. He rejected the latter's claims as the ethic of our times and chose, instead, to create a social and cultural movement of revolt – against, caste, brahminism, religion and the rule of men over women. Periyar's antagonism as well as affiliation to Gandhi need to be understood if we are to map the co-ordinates of his distinctive ethic. Besides, Periyar's life, world view, practice and ideas represent, in their complex articulation with one another, an experience, a consciousness, a politics that modern India did not choose and, as such, indicate choices which the so-called makers of modern Indian consciously eschewed and actively cast aside.

Where Gandhi looked to an abiding and deeply felt religious faith, experienced by him, at least, as an ineffable inner voice, an instruction from a morally sensitive conscience, to sustain political and social activism, Periyar trusted to reason. Defined by him as an intelligence which sought to splice apart and critically examine all sorts of phenomena, this reason existed in his lexicon as an adjunct of a fearless, questioning self; which was determined to claim its autonomy and dignity in a society which, for centuries, had subjected either to the brahmin's cunning power, divisions of caste and to notions of intellectual and ethical lowliness. Describing his epistemology, as it were, he once observed that he had always tried to go beyond appearances to get at the truth behind phenomena. As far as he was concerned, it was his power of rationality which helped him do this [Anaimuthu 1974:2009]. It was for this reason that Periyar praised and upheld the example set by the Buddha. He remarked that the Buddha had counselled men to use their minds and follow the dictates of their intelligence. He had also asked men to exercise their freedom to reject what their rational minds could not comprehend or accept, such as heaven, hell, salvation, and differences between human beings, such as brahmin, shudra and panchama [Anaimuthu 1974:307].

What was 'truth' to Gandhi, directing him to offer satyagraha in various instances was sophistry to Periyar: for, as he observed, the 'truths' which the Mahatma claimed for his own cannot be considered given and universal. For Periyar, truth was essentially relative and subjective and he did not imagine that there existed a surefire test that would help one ascertain what was truth and what was not in any given instance. The 'triumph of truth' Periyar argued, represented, more often than not, a triumph of cunning and authority. For one was as likely to submit to a regimen of truth, as to be convinced of it. For his own ideas, Periyar made no absolute claims and insisted they were to be accepted or discarded by subjecting them to rational and critical scrutiny at various moments in time. If Gandhi rested his 'truth' in a transcendence he believed to exist, Periyar refused to rest his arguments in anything, but the claims of the oppressed in the here and now (*Kudi Arasu*, September 6, 1931).

Where Gandhi demanded penitence and sacrifice, as for example, with the practice of untouchability, and insisted that only a morally active and repentant self can bring about social reform, Periyar advocated resistance and struggle, often urging his self-respecters to bring to the fore, those antagonisms and contradictions in caste society and act on them. This was particularly evident in Periyar's remonstrance to the adi dravidas. Rather than appeal to their felt lowliness, he sought to provoke their sense of defiance and anger. He upbraided them for referring to upper caste men as 'swamis', and for letting themselves be convinced that their physical condition – of dirt, ill-health and sickness – was because they had not worked enough to lift themselves out of their misery [Anaimuthu 1974:56]. He implored to look to and understand the system which required their labour and therefore kept them confined to a position of abject lowliness [Anaimuthu 1974:71-72].

Where Gandhi communicated through complex metaphors drawn from the language of faith and devotion, appealing to the meditative self, Periyar spoke as a pedagogue, a teacher, who sought to expound ideas and encourage discussion, debate and dialogue. Periyar was given to concluding his addresses with an entreaty: his listeners were to think through whatever they had heard at the meeting and decide for themselves if there were reason and justice in the things which had been told them.

Where Gandhi looked to Tolstoy, the righteous prophet, Periyar invoked Socrates;

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to the 'ashram' with its experiments in truth, was counterpoised the 'agora', that public and civic space to which all manner of people could claim access and rights. The Self-Respect Movement in fact caused the agora to come into existence for hundreds or ordinary people; adi dravidas and women not only attended self-respect meetings in large numbers, but took part and addressed the movement's several conferences.

Gandhi's piety and transcendence committed him and the Indian National Congress to a politics which commanded mass devotion, but, which, in the final analysis, was dictated by the hegemonic demands of a multi-layered Congress leadership and the material interests of a confident and growing bourgeoisie [Ghosh 1989; 1995]. Periyar's reason and commitment to the agora of the here and now left him with a constituency that was shifting, and which existed as a whole only in terms of that large and complex non-brahmin historic bloc, Periyar attempted to build and re-build. Sometimes this bloc appeared divided and internally inconsistent, as when rich non-brahmins found themselves being criticised for their class biases by young self-respecters committed to socialism. At other times, there ensued arguments between believers and atheists; between those who were convinced of the cultural worth of Saivism and those who felt all religious ideas and institutions were inexorably brahminical. Yet, Periyar's Catholic non-brahminism and his anti-caste mission held this unwieldy bloc together, especially at those strategic and crucial moments, when the larger interests of all non-brahmins were at stake, as during the anti-Hindi agitations and when the Congress ministry – formed after the 1935 elections – tried to impose an educational system that would allow youngsters to practise the caste vocation of their fathers. For Gandhi, for all that piety and faith, the here and now of politics proved determinate, whereas for Periyar, committed to the present and scorning transcendence, the future seemed to hold infinite promises.

Gandhi imaged the socially conscious and active subject of history as a devout upper caste Hindu, essentially noble and pious, who, of his own volition, would surrender his privileges and usher in change, conferring, as it were, equality and self-respect on those whom, until recently, he had imposed his logic of difference and exclusion. This subject was to attain his own in history through a conscious re-making of his subjectivity through specific acts of penance and sacrifice. He had to discover the untouchable in himself, suffer his indignity as his own and thereby cleanse himself of disgust, prejudice, fear and hatred. Likewise, by spinning, wearning khadi and working with his hands, he was to acknowledge and make his own, the labour and life of the Hindu peasant and weaver. At another level, he was expected to re-examine his sexual identity, since it was a particular deployment of masculinity, premised on desire, its satiation and the eruption of desire again, which forced mean to think dark thoughts, bred incontinence in all aspects of life and, thereby, urged them onto unethical action. The 'brahmacharya vrata', which Gandhi counselled to his male disciples, why even to Congressmen, rested on a particular vision of femininity: if men were to renounce desire, and forswear the excess and violence which desire propelled into existence, women had to rework the terms of conjugality. They were to transform the passive virtues, conventionally associated with them, patience, sacrifice, rectitude and suffering, into active ones and use them in the cause of the nation. Women, for Gandhi, were the ideal satyagrahis, natural political subjects in the Gandhian narrative of satyagraha. They were not to bound by their domesticity, but neither were they do discard their duties. In effect, they were to assume responsibility for the nation, as they did for the home and family.

Periyar worked with and through different notions of identity and sexuality. For him the lowest of the low in caste society, adi dravidas and women, were the natural subjects of history. But their emancipation and self-fulfilment in history were possible only if the entire social order of caste was stood in its head. That is, Periyar did not trust to the enabling power of individual consciousness alone to bring about transformation. Consciousness war for him always already collective. Entire communities of the oppressed, all those non-brahmin communities which stood shamed and humiliated by brahminism and caste, and women everywhere, were to create their own history, by responding in anger, in defiance and in unison, in full knowledge of what held them in thrall to an unjust social order. On one hand, this meant a renunciation of caste with all its privileges, an abjuring of that religious faith which legitimised caste and a re-making of society along non-hierarchical lines. On the other hand this required a re-making of masculine and feminine subjectivities, so that the much desired self-respect, mutuality and freedom Periyar sought out as the defining premises of his utopia, could be grounded in primary human relationships. Thus, reason and critique, desire and freedom, mutuality and reciprocity constellated into a figuration for Periyar, in which could be traced those new structures of feeling he wished to cultivate in his fellow beings. For him, the emergence of a social order rested as much on such structures of feeling, as they did on transformed material structures and social relationships.

We can make better sense of Periyar's complex utopian project by looking in some detail at how his self-respecters, especially women, understood and interpreted his ideas.

Women, Caste and Self-Respect

Imprecations against caste and its attendant horrors were often the subject of many a woman self-respecter's addresses to conferences, as well as the articles several of them wrote for one or the other of the Self-Respect Movement's journals, *Kudi Arasu, Puratchi, Paguthariyu* and *Samadharmam*. Women understood caste as not merely a division of labour and labourers but as a system which divided women as well. Such a division secured for some women relative comfort and security, but also bound them to ignorance. So much so that these women persisted in thinking that they were better off than their lower caste, working class sisters. Women self-respecters were particularly critical of nationalist women in this regard and took great exception to their entreaties to women to abide by tradition and serve their nation. Commenting on a meeting of 'Indian Women' held in Madras, under the auspices of the Congress, a *Kudi Arasu* editorial wondered, mirroring, as it were, the ideas of women self-respecters, how educated, upper caste women could forget the fact of their subordinate existence and seek to perpetrate it by invoking conventional role models, such as Sita, Nalayini, Chandramathi and Vasugi; women, whose husband-worship can hardly be considered worthy of emulation (*Kudi Arasu*, January 22, 1933).

In another instance, Minakshi, a regular contributor to *Kudi Arasu* urged her nationalist sisters to practise a different sort of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Rather than picket liquor shops and shops which sold foreign cloth, they would do well to picket and boycott the homes of those who oppose any and every move to a reform of women's lives; whether these have to do with the abolition of the 'devadasi' system or the rights to education and mobility of adi dravida women:

> You may offer satyagraha, why your very life, for the sake of our devadasi sisters who are being coerced by their parents into the profession of their forebears. Offer satyagraha in front of the homes of your sisters who disdain to grant our adi dravida sister's rights of access to the common well... (*Kudi Arasu*, March 6, 1932).

Of lower caste women, it was said that their lot was toil. In a remarkable article, titled, 'Women and Work', Neelavathi, a prominent speaker and writer in the Self-Respect Movement observed that if one were to leave aside the very rich and privileged amongst women, who lolled about all day long and idled their time away, the others

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worked – not merely at housework, but in "factories, hospitals, in the countryside...(in) tailoring, weaving, construction, vending..." Women, argued Neelavathi, were however denied the dignity of being workers, since society held that work was the mark of a man. Thus whatever women labourered at became theirs by destiny. For Neelavathi, it was important for women as well society to acknowledge their productive worth. Her plea that all women, except the idle few, be considered workers and accorded respect – and due wages, even for housework – represents a skilful deployment of Periyar's argument that all non-brahmins or 'shudras' ought to be considered workers by birth, since they were denied free and unrestricted access to all but the most menial of tasks in caste society (*Puratchi* April 29, 1934).

Periyar had noted: "Just as barhminism condemns a very large portion of the working population to shudrahood, so it has condemned women to the servitude of marriage" [Anaimuthu 1974:178]. Neelavathi seeks to establish a homology between women condemned to housework and childbearing and yet denied the status of labourers, and shudras condemned to their caste status (and labour) and denied the identity of productive workers.

What is important to note here is that while women like Minakshi reminded their nationalist peers to be attentive to questions of caste difference and consider the problems faced by devadasis and adi dravida women as equally pertinent to the national struggle, as, say the boycott of liquor shops, socialist-minded women like Neelavathi sought to remind all women of their common fate as workers in the family. The self-respecters acknowledged the fact that caste divided women and prevented them from coming to terms with all those common modes of oppression to which they were subject under patriarchy. Yet they also knew that this divide cannot simply be wished away and that women had to consciously work at coming together, rather than assuming that they could, simply because they were sisters together in the nationalist struggle.

Women self-respecters resisted caste in other ways as well: by endorsing adi dravida rights – to temple entry, to a separate electorate, to learning; by supporting the demand for communal representation – for all non-brahmins in government and education – and by opposing and criticising the ideology of nationalism, as exemplified by Gandhi. Kunjitham, an intelligent and well-read self-respecter met Gandhi, and questioned him closely about his views on varnadharma and caste. She was accompanied on that occasion by her husband, Gurusamy, and other self-respecters, all of whom were keenly interested in unravelling the tangle of piety, politics and pragmatism which lay at the heart of Gandhi's pronouncements and practice during this period (*Puratchi*, January 14, 1934). Neelavathi met with Gandhi during his visit to the Tamil country in 1934 and interrogated his faith in varnadharma, his views on the abolition of untouchability and the place he reserved for religion in public life (*Puratchi*, February 18, 1934).

It must be said here that many adi dravida women were active in the Self-Respect Movement. The most famous and visible amongst them was Anapoorani, an extremely well-read, articulate and daring woman who spoke out on a variety of matters, including atheism, the repression of caste and the rights of women. She married A Rathinasabapathy, an upper caste non-brahmin, and a socialist by conviction. Their marriage was considered by the Self-Respect Movement to be a major victory over caste and orthodoxy. Rathinasabapathy was also in the forefront of the struggle against the subordination of women and wrote a fascinating novelle, titled, *Yezhai Azhutha Kaneer* (The Tears of the Poor) (1932), which described a sort of dystopia, where men were punished for their sins towards women in the real world and cast into perdition and eternal suffering.

Perhaps the one significant practical act which enabled women self-respecters to speak out boldly against caste, nationalism and patriarchy was the self-respect marriage. Largely inter-caste, or an instance of a widow marriage, and deliberately secular, dispensing, as it did, with the services of the brahmin priest, the self-respect marriage form announced to the world at large the arrival of a new sort of family: trans-caste and existing as the germ, the primary constituent of a new, equal community. By rendering marriage a matter of individual choice and desire, as well as a social contract, the self-respect marriage form made the caste Hindu family appear suddenly vulnerable. With women deemed free to marry whomsoever they wished to, the integrity of caste too stood challenged, since caste identity, centred in the woman's body and consecrated through strategies of control and discipline, could now be exchanged for one that the woman wished to create for herself – in freedom, in self-respect and on the basis of a chosen reciprocity.

Women Self-Respecters and Their Claims on Reason

For women who, thus, opposed caste, their new sense of self came to hinge on two aspects of consciousness: Reason and mutuality. Reason was interpreted by women to mean an aspect of a probing, curious and active intelligence and one which would enable them unravel the meaning of all those rituals, customs and everyday practices which bound them to a life of unknowing and domestic servitude. Reason was to enable them question themselves and reflect on the choices they made, even if these happened to be merely quotidian ones. As Minakshi passionately expostulated in the course of her critique of civil disobedience:

> Sisters, reflect for a moment on the horrors you endure in your day-to-day life. You borrow money – because you wish to observe a custom, practise a ritual, you borrow for a funeral, a pilgrimage...Consequently, poverty, humiliation, debt, police warrant, mortgage, the misery that visits your children, unbearable sadness and the rebuke of others: one follows the other. Why must you do this? To preserve a convention, an orthodox custom? To appear virtuous in the eyes of others? Do you not realise your [minds] are diseased...stricken with barbarity and afflicted with degenerate rituals..." (*Kudi Arasu*, March 6, 1932).

More generally, women would uphold the claims of reason against the dictates of faith and religious norms and the rules of tradition. Thus, Ranganayagi Ammal, speaking at the Coimbatore district Self-Respect Conference, observed with some exasperation that no longer can the orthodox and the learned afford to beguile women by repeating that 'Ignorance becomes a woman'. 'Do not heed a woman's words'; 'Silence is a woman's adornment'. Women were now ready to claim the powers of reasoning for themselves and were ready to examine not only literary opinions and reflections on women, but also inquire into those ill-opinions men held of women (*Puratchi*, November 26, 1933). D Rangammal writing in *Puratchi* drew attention to the wastefulness of religious festivals, of the debauchery which accompanied them and of the plight of young women in pilgrimage towns, especially during festival times, when they were teased and near molested by feckless and rude young men (*Puratchi*, January 28, 1934).

Such questionings of religion and faith – and these may be found in all self-respect magazines – were enabled and inspired by the Self-Respect Movement's general recklessness and courage with respect to matters of faith. Self-respecters were critical of all religions and refused to accept that religion and faith could help constitute a viable identity and community. For strategic reasons, and in particular contexts, as when Gandhi and Congress insisted that adi dravidas were also Hindus, Periyar exhorted the lower castes to convert to Islam and secure their freedom and self-respect in a general Islamic brotherhood. But this was no general policy and at other times, Islam was as much criticised by the self-respecters as other religions. The practice of purdah, for instance, came in for a sustained critique and significantly enough, Islam's definitions of female identity and freedom were debated vigorously by several Muslims. For example, Aa Mu Mohammed Qasim Bhakavi wrote

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a long article in *Puratchi* titled 'Contraception and the Prophet' (*Puratchi*, December 24, 1933). Al-Haj Subahu Mo wrote an impassioned piece titled; 'Why Did Women Become Slaves? Muslim Women are also Slaves' (*Puratchi*, January 28, 1933). M K M Khader wrote on how it was absolutely essential that women be liberated, if a socialist republic was to be established (*Puratchi*, April 15, 1934).

Such reasoned denunciations of religion helped constitute religious ideas and practices as legitimate objects of analysis by not merely civil society, but also the state. In fact, the trajectory of the self-respecters' critique of religion traced a curve which lead them, inevitably, as it were, to demand that the state intervene in matters of religious custom, when these proved demeaning to women. In such instances, the state appeared to the self-respecters as embodying an intelligence and a rationality, clearly different from and superior to the logic which informed religious rituals and practices. The self-respecters' support for the devadasi abolition bill is of particular interest in this respect.

The self-respecters objected to the devadasi system for several interlinked reasons. For one, it seemed a deplorable instance of debauchery sanctified by the priest and the temple and rendered hoary by convention. Besides, the fact that devadasis were all inevitably from non-brahmin castes and that they were consecrated as temple dancers, in service, not merely to the diety, but to the deity's patrons, be they brahmin priests or men of wealth, irked women (as well as men) self-respecters. Then, again, the system presented itself as a desirable vocation, so much so that women who felt 'dedicated' into it did not really seem to understand the vicious logic which held them captive. For women self-respecters, religion, caste and the claims of masculine sexuality seemed to exist in a complex and unholy articulation in the figure of the devadasi. Periyar himself held similar views and articulated them quite forcefully [Anaimuthu 1974:170-73].

It is not to be wondered at then that women like Ramamrithammal, a devadasi who opted out of the devadasi systems and joined the Self-Respect Movement, were driven to fair degrees of self-denial and self-loathing, as they spoke and wrote against a vocation which was not theirs by choice. Ramamrithammal wrote a novel, *Dasigalin Mosavalai* (The Devadasis' Web of Deceit) (1936), which warned ingenuous, but rich, young men of the lure and power of the dasi on one hand, and which reprimanded dasis for squandering their self-worth and their very lives for the love of lucre. The novel betrays a certain puritanical will to 'cleanse' the diseased devadasi of her powers of seduction and in doing so ends up blaming the victim, as much as the victimiser. Yet the novel also makes it clear that within a system which chooses certain women to serve the lust of upper caste and wealthy men, and which sanctifies this choice as a god-given vocation, questions of female desire are inherently problematic: whether one damns the dasi or whether one calls attention to her 'autonomy', as some dasis did, during this period, not wanting to surrender their rights as 'nityasumangalis', and their conventional rights to property and ritual rights.

It was because they sensed the problematic nature of desire, rights and freedom, as these were understood and experienced by the devadasi, that self-respecters were convinced the rights of the devadasi cannot be thought through clearly within the confines of a system, which seemed to grant them sexual autonomy but which restricted them to the service of the powerful and wealthy. Thus they wished to do away with the system altogether and constitute these rights in a different context. This context was to be framed by the punitive powers of the state, which, as Periyar made clear, ought to be used to cleanse the body politic of social diseases, as well as by their vision of a new civil and social order [Anaimuthu 1974:173-76]. In other words, the law was to guarantee and enforce rights which were to be grounded in everyday practices, in those new structures of feeling, the self-respecters looked to create and re-create.

For self-respecters, it must be pointed out here, reason and desire did not exist as polar elements in consciousness. Periyar wrote at length on how love and desire cannot be authenticated, except as aspects of well-thought out, reasoned choices. Otherwise, love seemed to him capricious, mere tomfoolery, an infatuation of the moment [Anaimuthu 1974:180-84]. While he conceded that to desire is human and therefore, a crucial aspect of existence, and that there are no limits to freedom, autonomy and self-fulfilment, except those we set for ourselves, he held that in a social context, desire had to heed to norms of reciprocity and mutuality. Social restrictions and codes which forbade young widows from marrying again clearly went against the strictures of mutuality, for these codes allowed men to be polygamous, even as they imposed celibacy on women [Anaimuthu 1974:134-39]. Likewise, social and religious norms which forbade a man and woman from dissolving their marriage, were either of them unhappy, represented a travesty of the ideal of reciprocity which, as Periyar argued, ought to animate and ground conjugal food faith [Anaimuthu 1974:146].

In matters such as those discussed above, we find Periyar and his self-respecters aligning the claims of desire to notions of freedom on one hand and to the arguments of reason on the other. Elsewhere, as with his criticisms of the ideal of female chastity, we find Periyar arguing against a sexual ethic which sanctioned and legitimised male promiscuity, while reproving of and rendering illegitimate female desire. Marriage seemed to Periyar and others to capture best the sexual unfreedom thrust on women in the course of history, and in order to counter this state of existence, Periyar exhorted women to give into the claims of a free, self-validating desire, take on lovers, choose a life of economic self-sufficiency and abjure the responsibilities of motherhood [Anaimuthu 1974:184-88]. Here, of course, desire assumes relevance as a counter-ideal, an imperative in itself. Yet, in this instance as well, it is the rational, directing intelligence, committed to rendering transparent a gross injustice, that propels desire. Freedom and the love of freedom were for Periyar always already rational choices, in that they can be defined and understood and not merely felt and experienced. By the same token, desire, as an adjunct of reason requires and is authenticated only by rational self-expression.

Women and the Community of Self-Respect

Fighting caste and reasoning against faith, women self-respecters viewed themselves as the citizens of the future, as harbingers of the millennium. This millennial urge informed the movement's perceptions of itself to a great degree. Periyar and others often proclaimed themselves as revolutionaries who not only wished to stand caste society on its head, but who were doing so, in the knowledge that no one or no movement, since the time of the Buddha had attempted such a thing. For women, this millennial imagery translated itself as an invitation to citizenhood, to a community of comrades. Even the self-respect marriage vow echoed the spirit of comradeship the self-respecters wished to consecrate:

> Today our conjugal life that is based on love begins. From today I accept you, my dear and beloved comrade as my spouse, so that I may consecrate my love and co-operation for the cause of social progress, in such a manner as would not contradict your desires" (*Kudi Arasu* 1974: May 11, 1929).

As we had remarked earlier, marriage interpreted in the self-respect fashion, ceased to mark the limits to domesticity, family and community and, in fact, enabled women (and men) to orient their life to ideas, to the world outside. As the life of Kunjitham and Gurusamy, as of several others, indicate, self-respecters defined their lives in terms of the world, rather than the self and family. Working as full-time propagandists and movement builders, who did not mind travel, dislocations of home and career, and yet bearing and raising children –

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with the active support of their spouses, women self-respecters lead a life, where neither conjugality nor motherhood exerted a dominant and determinate influence. Periyar's – and the movement's – endorsement of women's reproductive choice played no mean role in freeing women from the bind of motherhood, both as a set of practices and ideology. While the freedom from actual child rearing routines may have proved more illusive than real, except in rare instances, the mental and imaginative freedom which women experienced, thinking beyond motherhood, was experienced as very real by women. This freedom implied that women could talk, think and act on ideas that were far removed from the sphere of everyday life: they could debate politics, philosophy, faith, in fact, any and everything. This freedom also implied that women could look on their bodies as their own, as part of their being, so to speak. They could resist reification, either into chaste wives or devoted mothers and could think of themselves as sportswomen, adventurers, workers and thinkers. As a *Kudi Arasu* editorial noted, women needed new role models in place of old ones: rather than self-sacrificing pativratas, they needed to be like women of these modern times who had made a name for themselves in science, in education, in sports and in other feats of endurance (*Kudi Arasu* 1974: January 22, 1933).

Free to remake themselves in whatever manner they desired and tied to men in their lives through ties of mutuality, women acquired a new identity: that of the citizen, the woman of civic virtue, and one who could claim and act on an identity which did not subordinate her to men, nor define her as essentially different from them. While Periyar sometimes argued that women's reproductive functions restricted them from laying claim to complete autonomy in the present scheme of things (*Kudi Arasu*, August 12, 1928), he also insisted that motherhood could be rejected, in fact, ought to be disowned by women themselves, in favour of parenthood. As he observed:

> We maintain that while it is the case women possess the attribute of bearing a child in their wombs for 10 months and eventually giving birth to it, this, in itself, does not make them different from men with respect to qualities such as anger, ruling power and strength. Likewise, we think that though men do not possess the [biological] means to get pregnant, it cannot be said they possess qualities different from women, in respect of calm, love and the power of nurture. If we are to value true equality – if there exists true love between man and woman – it is certain that all responsibilities except that of bearing a child should be considered common to both [Anaimuthu 1974:121].

Convinced of women's rights to all that men had access to and claims on, and wanting to create social institutions which would enable women share, or even lay aside the burden of motherhood, Girija Devi, a self-respecter and fiction writer, wondered if there should not be a special government department which would initiate such action, as would ensure the progress of women in all fields. Such a department, she reasoned, ought to be staffed only with women, who, initially could be nominated to office, but who would gradually by elected to their posts by an all woman electorate. This department was to undertake practical tasks, of educating women, providing them with opportunities for earning their living, and most importantly, it was to aid and assist in matters of pregnancy and child birth (*Kudi Arasu*, January 10, 1932).

The notion of citizenship, as it was adumbrated and defined by self-respecters, for both men and women, was a complex one: it did not merely call for a legal identity, though this was implicit in the movement's struggle for the civil rights of women, adi dravidas and others who were denied rights to a self-respecting existence. The Self-Respect Movement conceived of citizenship as the founding ideal of a new republic. It was to animate not merely claims made on the state, but on society as well; it implied and called forth a social commitment to the destruction of caste, wily faith and gender differences. Citizenship in this sense was to define new modalities of personal and social interaction, where self-respect and mutuality governed human relationships. It was to be expressive of new structures of feeling which implicated men and women in forms of communication that allowed for a felicitous and complex interplay between reason, emotion, desire, freedom on one hand and which established comradeship in love, as in politics, as the basis of the new community, on the other.

What was to be the relationship of citizenship to the economy? While self-respecters did deploy caste as a category of, what we would call, political economy, drawing attention to the manner in which one's caste status mediated one's access to work, education and social status, they did not think that economic exploitation stood to compromise a person's self-respect and rights, as much as did the oppressive power of caste. Besides, they defined the terms of power in caste society such that they could point out how the division which exists in this society, between those who carry out intellectual labour, and those who work with their hands, produce a surplus which is

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translated, not merely into material terms, but into symbolic and ritual terms as well. Knowledge, claimed and possessed exclusively by certain castes, was to them as much a mark of exploitative social relationships, as were relationships of production. As far as women were concerned, they were as condemned in this system as the adi dravidas – into slavery and ignorance. As S Ramanathan, a leading self-respecter, observed:

> ...because our forefathers held women as property, they had to create the phenomenon of untouchability to safeguard this property (*Kudi Arasu*, April 12, 1931).

Citizenship and Utopia

In many ways, the Self-Respect Movement bears comparison with the women's movement. Like the self-respecters, feminists address consciousness, as much as they do structure and attempt constantly to work out the relationship between the two, unwilling as they are to make the transformation of the one contingent on the transformation of the other. Feminist struggles in the interlinked realms of identity, community and comradeship, likewise, demand substantive changes in the content of human relationships, even as they seek formal guarantees for these changes in law. And, like the self-respecters, feminists seek to root changes, whether in structure or consciousness, in the everyday: in modes of address, attire, use of language, in forms of communication and in practices of everyday living. Just as how Periyar attempted to construct a non-brahmin historic bloc that could claim a shared and common identity in notions of self-respect and mutuality, so do feminists struggle to retain gender as a valid category for the coming together of women of different political persuasions and ideas. In both instances, the attempts have required an enormous amount of energy and imagination.

Given this homological relationship between two movements which were concerned with re-making the human subject of history, and given the fact that both have allowed themselves a great degree of political latitude in working out a politics of the possible, it seems important that we import lessons from the one into the other. In this context, I wish to look briefly at the debates which have grown around the demand, from various feminist and anti-feminist quarters, for a 'uniform' civil code. These debates bear a striking resemblance to those exchanges of 60 to 70 years ago and offer, on that account, a discursive and political context into which I wish to insert the legacy of the Self-Respect Movement. It seems to me that the movement possessed a notion of rights, claims and citizenship which was sensitive to differences, arising out of culture and community. Yet, it chose to understand these differences of caste and religion, in the context of a complex social system which deployed power and authority in ingenious ways to string them together in an unequal hierarchical social order. Thus it came to re-make society and re-deploy power in more democratic and dialogic ways and in doing so instructed a vision of gender justice which allowed women to dream of utopia. I am concerned here with feminist debates on the 'uniform' or, as some feminists term it, a 'gender-just' civil code, which are interesting, embattled and even acrimonious.

Those who are hesitant in urging forth that the state work towards the making of such a code, point out that given the communalisation of our polity, and the fact that communal parties are also insisting the state legislate such a code into existence, feminist demands will eventually be co-opted into a communal agenda. Besides, if such a code were to actually be drawn up, it may serve to strengthen the intrusive powers of the state and render it more impervious to democratic demands and pressures. As it stands today, the law is not really effective or useful in solving problems relating to women's lives, and to demand a new piece of legislation may help to naturalise the fiction, that changes in the law actually help to transform women's lives. Also, in a country whose peoples follow a bewildering array of customs, can one really and adequately define the nature, content and meaning of 'gender justice'; especially since, gender as a category exists and is in fact constructed only in articulation with a host of other social divisions and practices, such as those of class, caste and ethnicity. Proponents of this point of view argue that the more viable thing would be to suggest and ask for reform of personal and community laws.

Those who argue for a gender-just code point out that such a code will not really serve the purpose of communalists, since it will start out on premises which are essentially different from those which inform the communalist argument. For instance, they point to an existing draft (prepared by Forum Against Oppression of Women, Mumbai) and indicate that it not only re-defines marriage as a contract but also interprets the terms of conjugality completely differently. It is also argued that feminists who speak out in favour of a gender-just code are no more convinced of the efficacy of the law, as those who oppose it. But the demand for such a legislation is at least a step towards making the state a little more accountable to the plight of women living under different personal laws and suffering the discrimination and injustice all of them encode and practise. Besides, one may think of such legislation in terms of particular sorts of issues, such as to do with maintenance, guardianship and the right to freedom from domestic violence, rather than in terms of the proposed legislation's effect on community laws.

It is clear the second set of arguments are similar to those advanced by the self-respecters. They take as their starting point female subjectivity as they imagine it ought to exist, and speak in the name of a free, autonomous and desiring subject, who is already disengaged from community and caste ties. Like the self-respecters, they locate their arguments in the future, in a utopia – the existing draft for a gender-just code is utopian – and consider the present as a phase which ought to be subjected to continual social criticism and critical action, so that the guarantees sought for in law may enable transformations in civil society as well. Just as how the self-respecters' demands for interventionist legislation in the cause of the adi dravidas and women take meaning only in the context of their attempts to find and ground new structures of feeling in everyday life, so do these demands for a gender-just code make sense only in the context of an evolving, utopian feminist project. The point is the experiences of the Self-Respect Movement help in theorising the position of those feminists who are critical of and do not wish to ground identity in family and community, and who look to a comradeship to root a new and radical female subjectivity. They seem to suggest that a politics of identity need not always work from within already existing subaltern positions. It can also pitch its arguments in the future and in the present which is an anticipation of that future.

It is noteworthy that radical anti-caste movements, whether in Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra, have never shied a away from the question of power, especially that embodied in the state and its laws. They have worked at ways and means of using, capturing and deploying that power. Besides, they represent a tradition of protest which refuses the very idea of identity as grounded in community, especially a community that is pre-given and which looks to leap out of it – into an imagined utopia. It is this radical future which I would like to restore to its rightful history, a history which, however, must be claimed and earned, rather than inherited.

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